

NGOs & AID: The New Imperialism

By: Trevor Phillippi

In late 1884, Otto Von Bismarck assembled the western powers of the world to divide up an entire continent, in what is now called “The Scramble for Africa”. The Berlin Conference established the rules by which European states would divide, retain, and manage African colonies. The boundaries that were drawn were completely arbitrary, and in the rush to claim land, many rulers were unaware of what they were even getting. Entire nations and provinces were subsequently exchanged between European countries after the fact, when they learned more about what resources existed in what states. Then British Prime Minister said of the event: “we have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man’s feet have ever trod; we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were.” This is a remarkable admission and shines light on one of the great historical blunders of all time. By shepherding and dividing ethnic groups into arbitrary boundaries and forcing a centralized government on them, European powers were laying the foundation not for prosperity for these people, but for the underdevelopment that exists to this day.

The underdevelopment characteristic of poor african states can be explained pretty much completely by the colonization of Africa by European powers. Instead of allowing organic ethnic and geographic border to result, arbitrary ones were drawn and all of the sudden clans and tribes and entire ethnic groups were separated from one another, sometimes in territories controlled by 3 different foreign powers. What’s important to note as well is that a largely western and modern idea of a “nation state” was forced onto people for whom that concept did not exist (Greenfield). It’s not as though Africans shared the modern nationalistic consciousness that westerners did at the time. Separating ethnic groups leads to violence against central governments for secession, as well as against neighboring ethnic groups put into the same newly created western nation state. Data suggests that smuggling and crime is likely to increase where ethnic groups were separated across multiple states (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou). Resource exploitation by Europeans and African-rebel groups fighting for independence has caused irreparable environmental damage. When European powers finally were leaving African nations around the middle of the 20th century, they’d put in motion some of the most brutal ethnic wars and cleansing in recorded history. Colonial governments often favored specific local ethnic groups and marginalized other resident groups, so when colonial governments were gone, the power vacuum resulted in generations of oppression being taken out on the locally favored minorities. All of these complex issues contributed to the currently severely underdeveloped nations in Africa that persist to this day.

Today, much of the western world is trying to atone for its collective sin by funding development in third world countries. In the past 50 years, approximately 2.3 trillion aid has been poured into development, but what is there to show for that? In William Easterly’s *The White Man’s Burden*, he makes the case that western aid to

developing countries has at best not helped, and at worst done even more damage. He offers example after example of how plans for aid concocted in classrooms and boardrooms failed when it came to implementing them in context. He questions why millions of mosquito nets have been purchased yet much of the malaria risk zones still don't have access to them, and why Harry Potter was distributed en masse to eager fans when Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister of Britain, developed a grand plan to eradicate extreme poverty and offer relief to those who need it.

Easterly highlights the differences between “planners” and “searchers” as the key to doing effective development and aid. A planner is someone, probably well meaning, who develops a large scale plan of how to solve a problem, and then goes and tries to implement it in some developing context. A searcher is someone who questions whether they can even help to begin with, and starts by searching in developing contexts for small problems that can be addressed sustainably. Most westerners, specifically white westerners, are planners; it's simply how they are cultured. Especially in America, where we “are the greatest country on earth”. This mentality does not exactly produce the humility required to delicately seek out small problems that contribute to the web of poverty and address them. People want easy solutions to these tough problems, where they can give money and feel like they are “eliminating poverty”, rather than giving money to help a handful of families in a place they've never heard of.

This issue is a massive sustainability problem. NGOs continue to be ineffective in providing sustainable development, and this costs the global economy, and allows of environmental damage to occur in the meantime. In an increasingly globalized culture, it's not feasible for developed nations to continue to grow economically and technologically at rates alarmingly higher than developing and underdeveloped countries. We have to accept smaller solutions and become “searchers”.

Citations & Annotations

William Easterly

Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.

William Easterly is an NYU professor and development economist. He spent 15 years working as a senior adviser and economist at The World Bank before growing disillusioned with the top-down approach of modern development. He penned *The Elusive Quest For Growth* before writing *The White Man's Burden*. The essential point Easterly makes in his work is that the West's attempts to aid developing countries is at best not helping, and at worst hurting, stagnating growth, and creating new dependencies on foreign economies. Easterly's title

of the book is referential of Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden", which draws a comparison between the original colonization of Africa and what exists now with creating and fostering reliance on foreign aid. He also shows graphically how aid money has dramatically increased over time to developing nations, but growth has not been correlated with these increases. He also gives examples along the way of how some smaller bottom-up approaches to development *have* been effective. Easterly's work supports my own, because he shows how well meaning people have created dependence, stagnated growth, and continued to lord over whole parts of the world decades after colonialism in its traditional form ceased. I specifically used Easterly's statistics on aid and growth, in addition to his perspective on planners versus searchers to create small scale change and growth.

Quotes:

Gordon Brown was silent about the other tragedy of the world's poor. This is the tragedy in which the West spent \$2.3 trillion on foreign aid over the last five decades and still had not managed to get twelve-cent medicines to children to prevent half of all malaria deaths. The West spent \$2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get four-dollar bed nets to poor families. The West spent \$2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get three dollars to each new mother to prevent five million child deaths. The West spent \$2.3 trillion, and Amarech is still carrying firewood and not going to school. It's a tragedy that so much well-meaning compassion did not bring these results for needy people.

In a single day, on July 16, 2005, the American and British economies delivered nine million copies of the sixth volume of the Harry Potter children's book series to eager fans. Book retailers continually restocked the shelves as customers snatched up the book. Amazon and Barnes & Noble shipped preordered copies directly to customers' homes. There was no Marshall Plan for Harry Potter, no International Financing Facility for books about underage wizards.⁴ It is heartbreaking that global society has evolved a highly efficient way to get entertainment to rich adults and children, while it can't get twelve-cent medicine to dying poor children.

Let's call the advocates of the traditional approach the Planners, while we call the agents for change in the alternative approach the Searchers. The short answer on why dying poor children don't get twelve-cent medicines, while healthy rich children do get Harry Potter, is that twelve-cent medicines are supplied by Planners while Harry Potter is supplied by Searchers.

Liah Greenfeld

Greenfeld, Liah. *Nationalism and the Mind: Essays on Modern Culture*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2006. Print.

Liah Greenfeld is a professor at Boston University, a social scientist and anthropologist, and author of several books. Her work *Nationalism and the Mind*, specifically the essay of the same name from the book, trace the origins of “nationalism” as an idea, and showing how nationalism has become “the modern consciousness”. She describes how nationalism developed to give individuals a collective identity, and how that influenced their own perceptions of themselves and their country, and how these nationalistic identities can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. She also explains how upward-mobility and the development of nationalism are inextricably linked. Greenfeld’s work supports my own in helping me to understand exactly what happened with the scramble for Africa and how it created such disarray. Her work helped me clear up some thoughts I was having, and helped me see that importing nationalism from Europe/the west into a place where the necessary cultural infrastructure and legacy didn’t exist is a recipe for disaster. Specifically I used her ideas about nationalism altering consciousness and being linked to economics.

Quotes:

Thus, while economies of sustained growth (modern economies) cannot exist without nationalism, nationalism can exist without spawning economies of sustained growth or economic modernization.

The egalitarian presupposition of nationalism’s image of society, which necessitates an open and fluid system of social stratification, i.e. the class system, characterized by social mobility, makes the individual the historical agent and bases the social position, or status, on transferable goods of wealth and education.

As much as the open class structure, the state and civil society, and the modern economy characterized by sustained growth (in nations which choose to compete in the economic arena), anomie is an implication of the nationalist image of reality. Representing a condition of cultural insufficiency, it inhibits the formation and normal functioning of the human mind. I am, therefore, proposing that nationalism inhibits the formation and normal functioning of the human mind.

Michalopoulos and Papaioannou

Michalopoulos, Stelios, and Elias Papaioannou. “The Long-Run Effects of the Scramble for Africa.” (2011): n. pag. Online.

Michalopoulos and Papaioannou are PhD candidates from Yale writing for the National Bureau of Economic Research regarding the effects of The Scramble for Africa on the continent in present day terms. The main point of the work is showing how much of today’s problem in developing Africa can be attributed directly to colonial influence and the arbitrary sectioning up of Africa. They show this by describing the history of what happened

at The Berlin Conference, demonstrating the ill-effects of what happened, and then offering statistics proving their points. Their research supports my work because I am drawing a connection between the failed policies and aid of today and colonialism of the 19th century. Additionally, it shows some of the masked motivations of today's aid being not totally about doing good but making up for past failures of white westerners. Specifically, I used their work on the history of the Berlin Conference, and their work discussing the dangers of dividing up ethnic groups and how that led to political instability historically.

Quotes:

The anecdotal evidence suggests that the scramble for the continent was arbitrary. As the British prime minister at the time Lord Salisbury put it in a famous sally, "we have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man's feet have ever trod; we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were." There is little disagreement among African scholars on the artificial border design. For example, Asiwaju (1985) argues that the "study of European archives supports the accidental rather than a conspiratorial theory of the marking of African boundaries."

Fourth, African borders are poorly demarcated and not well delineated due to the imprecise colonial treaties. This has resulted in border disputes, especially when such poorly demarcated borders cause the partitioning of ethnic groups.¹² The conflict between Mali and Burkina Faso over the Agacher Strip, where the Bobo reside, illustrates the problems caused by poor demarcation. The escalation of minor conflicts that started after independence resulted in a fully blown war in 1985.¹³ Imprecise colonial treaties seem to have contributed to conflict in Somalia (Higham (1985)), while the ambiguity of the tripartite treaty between Britain, Italy and Ethiopia of 1902 has also played a role in the Eritrea-Ethiopia war.

Sixth, due to their ethnic contacts across the border, partitioned ethnicities may engage in smuggling and other criminal activities. For example, in his analysis of the Anglo-French partitioning of the Sultanate of the Mandara in the Nigeria-Cameroon boundary, Barkindo (1985) writes that "the most serious problem was the increase in crime and disputes across the border. The fact that the border divided people of the same family and settlements made it difficult to check crime and control smuggling." Collins (1985) also describes how smuggling allowed the Hausa to arbitrage price caps and other distortionary policies in Niger and Nigeria.